

The Great Lakes: The U.S. and Canada's Freshwater Treasures



1. Introduction

A massive sheet of ice, the last of the Ice Age [glaciers](#), crept across the North American continent. Covering thousands of miles, the ice sheet inched south across the vast region that is now Canada and what is today the northern United States. Finally, it slid to an icy stop near the present-day city of Chicago. All the while, the sheer weight of the huge glacier reshaped the landscape, grinding rocks into “rock flour,” obstructing streambeds, and flattening mountains.

After thousands of years, Earth began to warm, and the vast blanket of ice began retreating. It left behind a transformed land, with high ridges and huge holes that the ice sheet had gouged into the land. As the ice melted, clear, fresh water filled the huge holes, and the Great Lakes were born.

Over time, a rich [ecosystem](#) developed on the land left bare when the glaciers retreated. An ecosystem is a community of all the living things in an area, including plants, animals, and the physical environment in which they live. Ecosystems can be as small as a lawn or as large as Earth. The Great Lakes make up the world's largest [freshwater](#) ecosystem.

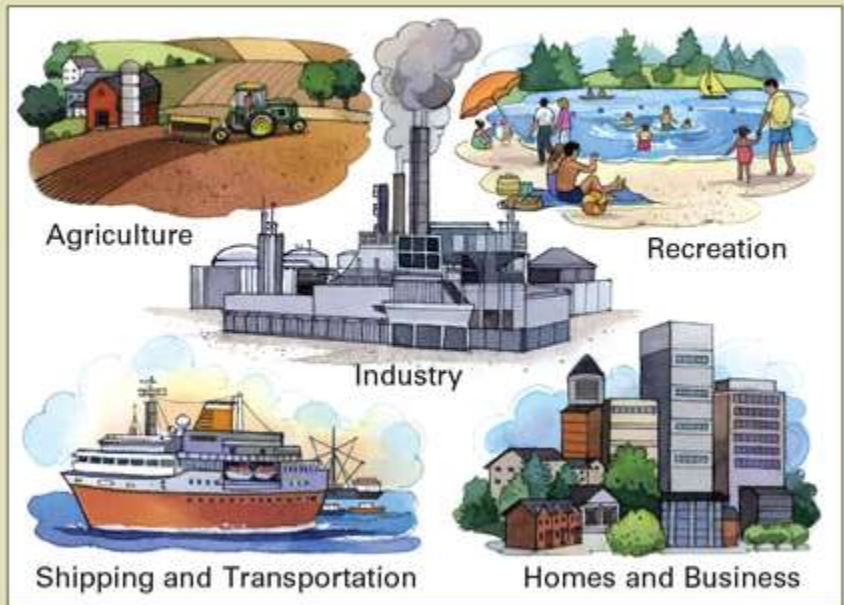
It took thousands of years for the movement of glaciers to create the Great Lakes. In just decades, however, human activity has greatly changed this region. In this chapter, you will learn how people can upset an ecosystem. You will also find out what can be done to solve some of the problems that human activity has created in the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Essential Question

How can people best use and protect Earth's freshwater ecosystems?

The diagram shows some of the main ways that people use the Great Lakes. All of these uses affect the lakes' ecosystem in some way, large or small. Keep this diagram in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.

Graphic Organizer

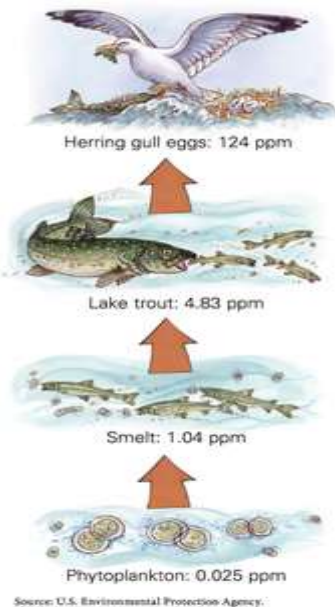


2. The Geographic Setting



Five lakes—Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario—make up the Great Lakes. Only one of the lakes, Lake Michigan, is entirely within U.S. territory; the other four are shared by Canada and the United States. In fact, the U.S.-Canada boundary runs through the four lakes. Together, the Great Lakes form the largest group of freshwater lakes on Earth.

More than one tenth of the U.S. population and one fourth of the Canadian population live in the Great Lakes region, and they use the lakes in many ways. People in both countries depend on the lakes for drinking water. They also rely on lake water for use in factories, irrigation on farms, and generation of electric power. In addition, the lakes provide opportunities for shipping, fishing, and recreation, such as boating and swimming.



One of North America's Largest Watersheds

Think of standing on a hill and pouring water from a large container onto the ground, and then watching the water flow downhill. While running downhill, some of the water would soak into the ground and, if there were a hole along the way, water would fill it to form a tiny lake. You would have created your own tiny **watershed**.

A watershed is a geographic area that includes all of the land and waterways that drain into a body of water. Watersheds come in many shapes and sizes, including hills and valleys and cities and towns. Smaller watersheds can drain into larger watersheds. The Great Lakes region is one of the largest watersheds in North America.

The Great Lakes are so large that they look and act like oceans. In fact, people have called them “the fourth seacoast” of the United States. Unlike the oceans, though, the lakes are filled with fresh water that has little or no salt. Thus they are also called “the sweetwater seas.”

A Vast and Varied Ecosystem

The Great Lakes region is a vast ecosystem. One way to understand how the living things in the Great Lakes ecosystem are related to one another is to look at who eats what. These relationships make up what scientists call a **food web**. Food webs include both plants and animals that feed on each other.

Every ecosystem has its own food web, which is made up of many **food chains**. A food chain is a series of plants and animals, each of which depends on the next for food. In the Great Lakes ecosystem, for example, one food chain might begin with plants that grow in lakes and rivers. The next link in the chain might be insects that feed on those plants. These insects are eaten by tiny fish, which are then eaten by larger fish. Eagles sitting at the top of the food chain, in turn, may eat the larger fish. Another food chain might begin with tiny organisms known as algae and end with a river otter.

The food web is an important part of any ecosystem. If one part of a food web is harmed, it affects all of the living things in the ecosystem. For instance, if a fish is poisoned by **pollution**, any animal that eats that fish will be poisoned as well. Or, if a type of plant or fish is lost from an ecosystem, all animals that feed on that plant or fish will lose part of their food supply. In this way, all living things in a food web depend on one another for their survival.

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ecosystem a community of all the living things in an area and the environment in which they live

food chain a series of plants and animals, each of which depends on the one below it for food. A food chain usually forms part of a much larger food web.

food web all of the feeding relationships within an ecosystem. Each living thing in a food web provides food energy to other living things within that ecosystem.

freshwater made up of water that is fresh, not salty. This term is also used to describe creatures that live in fresh water, such as freshwater fish.

watershed a geographic area that includes all of the land and waterways that drain into a body of water. Sometimes a watershed is also called a *drainage basin*.

3. The Great Lakes in 1969

For many years, people didn't worry about the Great Lakes ecosystem. The Great Lakes and its rivers were so large that most people didn't think human activity could affect them much. By the late 1960s, though, it was clear that there were problems. News articles similar to the one below made people aware that the Great Lakes were heavily polluted—and of how dangerous such pollution could be.

The Sad State of Our Once-Great Lakes

July 28, 1969

The Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio, looks like a melted chocolate mess. It is mud-brown, with a layer of oil on top. Gases bubble strangely on its surface. So it was not surprising when the filthy river, part of the Lake Erie watershed, burst into flames last month.

A Burning River and Dead Ducks

No one knows exactly what started the Cuyahoga River fire on June 22. It might have been a spark from a passing train. Whatever the source, the spark ignited picnic benches, piles of logs, and other garbage in the river. The burning debris set fire to oil floating on the river's surface. The flames blazed across the river and up in the air. They reached about five stories in height.

While the Cuyahoga River burned in Cleveland, another event was taking place on the Detroit River. A Detroit official was showing news reporters around the waterfront. As he assured them that the water was not as polluted as it looked, two ducks flew in for a landing. They paddled around the polluted river for a brief moment. Suddenly, they began choking, keeled over, and died.

These events show the terrible condition of the rivers that flow into the Great Lakes. But what of the Great Lakes themselves? Local residents have described the lakes as “cesspools” and “industrial wastebaskets.” They claim that the lakes are used as dumping grounds for every kind of pollutant, from sewage to toxic chemicals.

Out-of-Control Algae

Television ads boast about the long-lasting suds of laundry detergents. Those suds may not cost a lot at the supermarket. But detergents are taking a toll on the Great Lakes.

Visitors to Lake Erie today see large mats of algae near the shore. This algae explosion is caused by phosphorus, a chemical in detergents. Algae need phosphorus to grow, but too much of it causes algae to grow out of control. Lake Erie is covered with algae mats that are up to two feet thick.

Algae mats create many problems. They choke fish. They clog filters in water treatment plants. They cover beaches in slime. And they make lake water taste like rotting vegetation.

DDT Kills More Than Mosquitoes

For years, the pesticide DDT has been used in the Great Lakes region to control insects. It is sprayed on crops and on waterways to kill mosquitoes and other pests. But when DDT enters rivers and streams, it also enters the Great Lakes food web.

Today, America's national bird, the bald eagle, has almost disappeared from the Great Lakes because of DDT poisoning. The eagles feed on fish that live in water polluted with the pesticide. Over time, a toxic amount of DDT builds up in their bodies.

The DDT doesn't kill the adult birds. Instead, it weakens the eagles' eggshells. The shells of eggs laid by female eagles are so thin that most break before the young are ready to hatch. The few eaglets that do hatch may already have DDT in their blood.



Invading Lampreys and Alewives

Bald eagles are not the only disappearing species. For the past century, people have fished the lakes for fun and profit. Fishing boats once harvested millions of pounds of fish every year. Now, due partly to overfishing, whole populations of fish have almost disappeared.

While some fish are disappearing, species that are not native to this area are overrunning the lakes. The invasion of nonnative species began in 1829 when the Welland Canal connected the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. The canal allowed species from the Atlantic Ocean to swim or be carried by boats to the Great Lakes.

One deadly invader is an eel-like animal known as the sea lamprey. Lampreys act like vampires. They suck the blood out of fish. Over time, sea lampreys have killed most of the whitefish, lake trout, and other fish native to the Great Lakes.

Another invader is the alewife, a type of herring. Alewives are small but have huge appetites. They have devoured entire species of fish. They also compete with other fish for food. The first alewife wasn't discovered in Lake Michigan until 1949. Yet by the mid-1960s, alewives made up 9 pounds of every 10 pounds of fish swimming in the lake.

Alewives die off in the spring. Every year, tons of dead alewives wash up on lake beaches. Clouds of flies lay eggs on the rotting fish. Soon, the smelly fish are riddled with maggots. As a result, most beaches are unbearable during the die-off season.

Can the Lakes Be Saved?

Scientists today have begun to talk about the death of the Great Lakes. They warn that unless the lakes are cleaned up soon, they may become lifeless ponds. The question is, will people do what is needed to save them?

A week ago, two American astronauts became the first humans to walk on the moon. If the United States can accomplish such an incredible feat, then surely Americans can meet the challenge of restoring the Great Lakes.



4. The Great Lakes Today: Pollution

During the 1960s and 1970s, the state of the Great Lakes worried many people, both Americans and Canadians. Dr. Seuss, the famous children's author, wrote about Lake Erie in his book *The Lorax*. In this 1971 book, fish living in a polluted lake decide to look for a new home. Dr. Seuss wrote,

*They'll walk on their fins and get woefully weary,
In search of some water that isn't so smeary.
I hear things are just as bad up in Lake Erie.*

By 1991, however, Lake Erie had improved so much that this last line was removed from *The Lorax*. This amazing change was due to cleanup work done on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border.

Making Laws to Reduce Pollution

In 1972, the United States and Canada created the first Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, pledging to clean up and protect the Great Lakes ecosystem. The first cleanup efforts involved [point-source pollution](#)—pollution from a single source, such as a discharge pipe at a sewage treatment plant or a factory.

New laws put strict limits on the amount of phosphorus and other chemicals that factories and sewage treatment plants could release into the lakes. Detergent makers stopped putting phosphorus in their products. Industries stopped dumping oil and other pollutants into rivers draining into the lakes. Other laws banned the use of a number of [toxic chemicals](#), like PCBs and DDT.

The new laws gradually worked. The Cuyahoga River was no longer flammable, or likely to catch fire. Algae growth was greatly reduced, and the lakes turned from green back to blue. PCBs and DDT in the food chain declined. And, as the amount of DDT in fish declined, the bald eagle made a comeback.



Continuing Pollution Challenges One great challenge in the Great Lakes today is non-point-source pollution, or pollution that comes from many sources. One source, for example, is rainfall or snowmelt. Runoff—the water not absorbed by soil—travels over the ground, picking up pollutants from soil, and then into lakes and rivers. Runoff from storms also picks up waste from industrial and construction sites.

Old toxic waste dumps also pollute since many contain poisons that leak into waterways. There are as many as 250 dumps on the shores of the Niagara River alone.

Pollution from the air damages watersheds as well. Mercury, among other things, is released into the air when coal is burned. This highly toxic metal falls back to Earth mixed with rain or as dust and then enters waterways and the food web.

Canada and the United States are working to clean up non-point-source pollution, and new laws have been passed to limit harmful chemicals in the air, water, and soil. The two nations are also working to clean up toxic sediment, or polluted soil that has settled at the bottom of lakes and rivers. Removing such sediment is both difficult and costly. Water flows so slowly out of most of the Great Lakes that pollutants entering the lakes are likely to stay. Lake Superior, the largest and deepest Great Lake, retains water for 170 years or longer.

The best way to deal with pollution is to prevent it. Today education programs encourage prevention. As a result, people in industry and farming are using fewer harmful chemicals, and consumers are choosing products that are safer for the environment.



5. The Great Lakes Today: Invasive Species

Scientists estimate that there are more than 185 invasive species in the Great Lakes today. Invasive species are nonnative plants and animals that invade a new ecosystem. The sea lamprey described earlier in this chapter is one such invader.

Most Invaders Arrive by Sea

Most invasive species travel to the Great Lakes by water. Some even come in the ballast water of ships. Ballast water is water that is pumped into the bottom of a ship to keep it stable. After arriving at a port, the ship releases the ballast water—and any creatures that were in it.

Other invaders, like the zebra mussel, hitch rides on the underside of ships. Once zebra mussels reach a suitable location, they multiply rapidly. In fact, up to 70,000 mussels can thrive in a single square meter of water.

Invasive Species Upset the Ecosystem

Invaders like the zebra mussel, sea lamprey, and alewife have all damaged the Great Lakes ecosystem. Zebra mussels, for example, steal food from native species, clog water pipes, and attach to docks. They also make swimming dangerous because of their sharp shells.

The Asian carp is another major threat to the Great Lakes. Catfish farmers in the American South brought this large, ever-hungry fish from Asia to clean algae and other things from their ponds. However, during floods, many of these ponds overflowed, and carp escaped into rivers. Now carp in the Mississippi River are migrating northward toward Lake Michigan. Many people fear that the Great Lakes will someday become giant carp ponds.

The United States and Canada are working to prevent more non-natives from entering the Great Lakes. Shippers are being asked to treat their ballast water more carefully. A barrier has



been constructed to keep Asian carp and other nonnative fish in the Mississippi River from entering the Great Lakes. In addition, several states have banned the sale of live Asian carp for fear they will have disastrous consequences on the Great Lakes food web.

Another approach has been to stock the Great Lakes with species that will eat the invaders. Pacific salmon, for example, have been introduced into the lakes to control alewives. Alewife numbers have dropped greatly as a result, and native fish have begun to recover.

6. The Great Lakes Today: Habitat Loss

A century ago, loggers in the Great Lakes region told folktales of a giant lumberjack named Paul Bunyan. Bunyan was so gigantic that he could cut down a forest in minutes. One tale tells of how he scooped out ponds to provide drinking water for his big blue ox, Babe. Today those ponds are the Great Lakes.

In the time of the Paul Bunyan stories, dense forests covered the Great Lakes region, so nobody worried about **habitat** loss. A habitat is the natural environment in which a plant or an animal lives. But habitat loss is a big worry in the region today.



Restoring Forest Habitat

When settlers moved into the Great Lakes region in the 1800s, they cleared patches of forest for farms. Later, loggers cut down more, and still later more land was cleared for factories and cities. In time, almost half of the region's original forest was lost to development. When habitats are lost, the plants and animals that live there are often lost as well.

Today people are working to reverse forest loss in the Great Lakes watershed. Timber companies are cutting trees in ways that are less harmful to forests, and they replant trees in areas that have been logged. The result is that forests around the Great Lakes are now expanding instead of shrinking.

Protecting Precious Wetlands

Like forests, **wetlands** were gradually lost as the Great Lakes region developed. A wetland is an area where the soil is usually wet all year, such as marshes, bogs, and swamps. Wetlands provide habitats for a wide variety of wildlife. At the same time, they help to control flooding during storms.

In the past, wetlands were viewed by many people as worthless bogs, and over time, more than half of the wetlands in the Great Lakes region disappeared. Only in recent years have people begun to see the value of wetlands habitat.

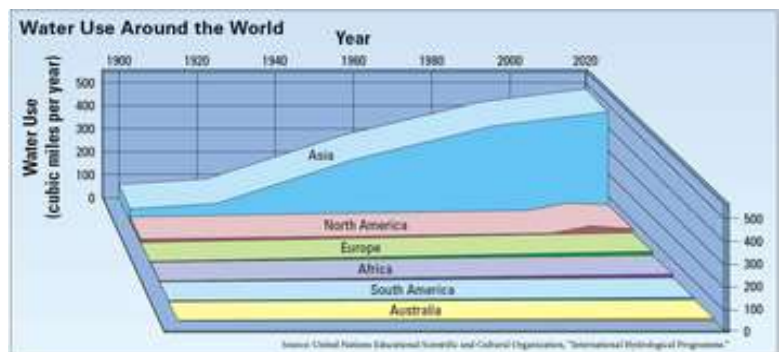
Today public and private groups are working to protect wetland habitats. One way is by creating nature preserves on existing wetlands. Another is by teaching landowners how to protect wetland areas. In some places, developers must create more than one acre of new wetland for every acre they destroy.

Summary - Beginning to Think Globally

In this chapter, you read that the Great Lakes are the world's largest freshwater ecosystem. You saw how plants and animals in this ecosystem form a complex food web. You also learned how pollution and the invasion of nonnative species of fish are threatening the health of the Great Lakes. Finally, you found out how people are working to clean up and preserve this large watershed.

Water Is Essential to Life

Managing freshwater ecosystems is of major importance around the world. All living things need water. Approximately 70 percent of Earth's surface is covered by water. However, nearly 98 percent of that water is too salty for human use. Of the remaining 2 percent that is fresh water, three fourths is frozen in ice caps, or permanent coverings of ice. That leaves less than 1 percent of Earth's water to meet human needs.



People obtain fresh water from many sources. Some draw water from rivers, lakes, and streams while others depend on wells that tap into underground water supplies. In other places, people collect and store rainwater to meet their needs. And in still other places, people desalinate seawater, or remove the salt from it.

Not all fresh water is safe for human use. Of the world's more than 6 billion people, at least 1 billion lack a steady supply of clean, safe drinking water. Unsafe water creates huge health problems. For instance, every day 4,000 children die from diseases that could have been prevented by having clean water to drink. And every year more than 2.2 million people die from diseases, such as cholera, related to unsafe drinking water.

Water Shortages Are Increasing

The number of people on Earth grows larger each year, but the supply of fresh water is not increasing. As a result, more than 1.6 billion people live in areas facing water shortages.

China is one of those countries. To meet the water needs of its large population, China is pumping large amounts of water out of underground supplies. However, these supplies are slowly shrinking because more water is being pumped out than is replaced by rainfall each year. Also, some rivers in China are so polluted that their water can't be used to irrigate crops.

Competition for limited water supplies can result in conflict since some rivers flow through many countries. When one country dams a river for irrigation water, it may reduce the amount of water flowing to countries downstream.

Egypt, for example, has a population of more than 81 million people, but it receives almost no rainfall. Instead, Egyptians depend on the Nile River to meet their water needs. Before reaching Egypt, though, the Nile travels through several countries. If any of those countries reduced the flow of the Nile, Egypt could be starved for water—and the result could be a water war.

Climate Change May Shrink Water Supplies

In the last 25 years, Earth's climate has warmed slightly, and many scientists hypothesize that this warming trend will continue. Such a shift in climate could have an effect on water supplies. Some areas, for instance, might get less rainfall than they do today while others might experience much more rain and frequent flooding.

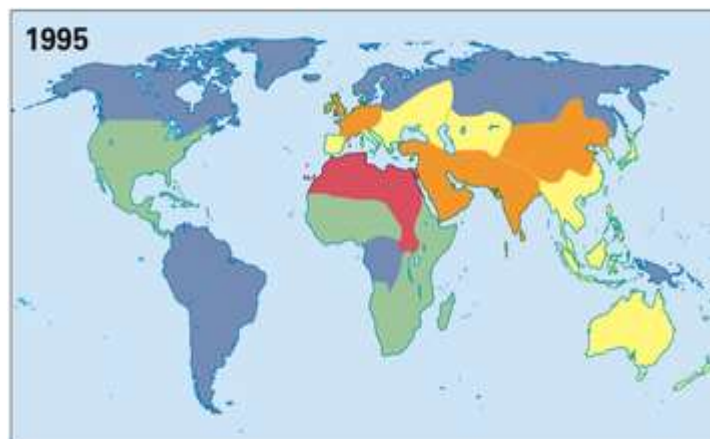
If these changes occur, managing water supplies will become more important than ever. Countries with shortages will need to improve their water collection and storage methods. On the other hand, those with too much water will need to improve their flood defenses. Think about these potential problems as you examine maps showing changes in the world's freshwater supplies in the next section.

Global Connections

The maps show the world's average freshwater supplies for three different years. Each map shows the availability of water per person on six continents. The maps do not show the total amounts of fresh water available in each year. The map for the year 2025 is based on population estimates for that year.

What factors might cause the changes in freshwater availability you see in the maps?

Population is growing rapidly in places like India and Africa, but the amount of fresh water is not increasing. As a result, far more people must share the same amount of water. Climate changes in the future may also reduce the amount of clean, fresh water available. In addition, some sources of fresh water, such as wells, may have been polluted, and now these sources are no longer safe.



What concerns for the future can be drawn from the maps?

The maps show that freshwater shortages are likely to increase over time. This situation could lead to rising water costs. It could also lead to less food production, since many crops require regular irrigation. In addition, public health problems could arise as people turn to less safe sources of water to survive.

How can people best use and manage the world's freshwater resources?

People can do many things to better manage sources of fresh water. One is to prevent all kinds of water pollution. Another is to find better ways to store and distribute existing water supplies. Using less water in homes, industries, and on farms can stretch limited supplies. So can recycling water so that it can be used again and again.

